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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of age on interpersonal evaluation of persons, particularly the elderly as individuals and not as a group. Using a 75-year-old target and a 23-year-old target, the experimenter predicted and found support for the idea that personal information contained in a transcript would evoke sympathy, and thereby lead subjects to overcompensate for their biases by rating the 75-year-old target more favorably than the 23-year-old target. The two basic questions are: (1) what effect would the unfavorable stereotype have on subjects when they are responding not to the category "old people" but to one specific old person about whom personal information has been provided? and (2) does the sympathy and overcompensation produced by personalization depend on the information presented about the target? (VG)

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Age as a Determinant of Interpersonal Evaluations

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In the absence of specific information about a person, we often rely on stereotypes to determine our reaction toward him. That is, we implicitly assign the person to a particular category or group, and respond to him on the basis of that categorization. If the group is viewed positively, we respond to the individual positively; if the group is viewed negatively, we respond to the individual negatively. Moreover, the use of stereotypes is probably facilitated to the extent that group members are easily identified, marked, or in some way stigmatized.

Recent research has suggested that the elderly may represent such a stigmatized group (Axelrod & Eisdorfer, 1961; Hickey, Hickey, & Kalish, 1968). Specifically, the elderly appear to be grouped separately and reacted to differently from other age groups. The general reaction is one of negativity (McTavish, 1971). The aged are stereotypically viewed as being generally ill, mentally slow, inactive, unproductive, bothersome and self-derogating (see e.g., Aaronson, 1966; Eisdorfer & Altrocchi, 1961; Axelrod & Eisdorder, 1961; Hickey et at., 1968; Hickey & Kalish, 1968).

In all of these studies subjects simply reported their attitudes and beliefs about old people <u>in general</u>. Seldom are subjects asked to respond to a particular old person, or given any personal information about the target before making their ratings. However, stereotypes might be used most often in just those situations where specific information about the target is lacking.

It seems reasonable to ask what impact the unfavorable stereotype would have on subjects when they are responding not to the category "old people", but to one specific old person about whom personal information has been provided. One possibility is that personalizing the target person may evoke sympathy for him among raters. This may lead raters to

compensate for the stereotype by responding more favorably to the stigmatized target person (cf. Schuman & Harding, 1963). Indeed, such sympathy might lead to an overcompensation, so that an elderly person is rated more favorably than a similarly portrayed younger person. The latter possibility is suggested by recent research on reactions to a different stigmatized group--black Americans. Though stereotypes of blacks are changing, the white majority still views blacks as a category, with suspicion, hostility, and negative prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew, 1971; Sigall & Page, 1971). Yet in a recent series of experiments, raters evaluated an anonymous person more positively if he was labeled as being black than if he was not labeled as to his racial identity (Carver, Glass, Snyder, & Katz, Note 1). This "positivity" effect was obtained in three separate instances, each of which used a bogus interview transcript to present personal information about the targets.

Another question that may be asked is whether the sympathy and overcompensation produced by personalization depends on the information presented about the target. One possibility is that overcompensation occurs only when the information contradicts the stereotype. If so, an older person should be rated more favorably than a younger person only when both are presented in a positive manner. Alternatively, perhaps the information about the target need not conflict with the stereotype--rather, personalization of the target per se may be sufficient to produce sympathy and overcompensation. If so, older persons should receive more favorable ratings than younger persons, regardless of whether both are portrayed in a positive or a negative manner.

The research I'm about to describe investigated these notions. Each subject was asked to read what was portrayed as a transcript of a personal interview. The transcript presented the interviewee in either a positive or a negative manner. Information contained in the transcript indicated that

the target person was either 23 or 75 years of age. It was predicted that the personal information contained in the transcripts would evoke sympathy, and thereby lead subjects to overcompensate for their stereotype of the elderly by rating the 75 year old target more favorably than the 23 year old target.

Method

Subject

The subjects were 21 women and 19 men, selected from introductory psychology courses at Carnegie-Mellon University. Subjects completed the experiments in groups ranging in size from two to six and were randomly assigned within each group to one of the experimental conditions described below.

Procedure

The subjects were told that they would be participating in a study on impression formation. It was explained that the experiment consisted of three conditions. In one condition, subjects watched a videotape of an actual interview and then evaluated the interviewee. Another group of subjects ostensibly listened to an audiotape of the interview before making their ratings. The present subjects were being asked to read typewritten transcripts of the same interview and then rate the interviewee in a similar manner. Subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to determine how impressions would differ as a function of how the interview information was presented.

After this introduction, each subject was given a transcript of the bogus interview. A line at the top of the transcript presented some physical charteristics of the interviewee and was followed by a series of 13 questions and answers.[1]

Half of the subjects were led to believe that the interviewee was 23 years of age; the remainder were led to believe that the respondent was 75 years of age. In the young condition, the line across the top of the transcript read "Dan B., Male, 23, 5'9", 150 pounds." In the old condition, the line read "Dan B., Male, 75, 5'9", 150 pounds." The first question on the transcript asked the interviewee to state his age. Depending on age condition, the answer was either "Twenty-three, I'll be twenty-four in about three months," or "Seventy-five, I'll be seventy-six in about three months." The following additional question was also inserted into the transcripts of the old condition: "How long have you been coming to this community center for aged?" The respondent's reply was "Since I turned 65, for the last 10 years I guess." To maintain credibility, while retaining a parallel between the transcripts of the two age conditions, the wording of some of the questions and answers differed in tense, e.g., "What did your parents do?" versus "What do your parents do?" The transcripts for the two age conditions were otherwise identical.

Half of the subjects in each age condition received a favorable transcript in which the interviewee was portrayed as a person with an upper-middle class background, high ambitions, varied interests, and many friends. The remaining subjects read unfavorable transcripts which portrayed the interviewee as a person from a lower class background, with few friends, no particular interests, and no plans for the future.

After reading the transcript, each subject rated the interviewee on a series of 11 descriptive dimensions. Each dimension consisted of a 7-point scale anchored by polar-opposite adjectives, e.g., "intelligent" versus "unintelligent," "hardworking" versus "lazy." The 11 ratings were

summed to yield an overall measure of the interviewee's attractiveness to the subject.

The foregoing manipulations yielded a 2 x 2 factorial design: old versus young target person; and favorable versus unfavorable transcript.

Results

The dependent variable was the attractiveness ratings of the interviewee summed across the 11 descriptive dimensions (see Table 1). Subjects who read favorable transcripts were more attracted to the

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Insert Table 1 about here

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interviewee than those who read unfavorable transcripts, F (1, 36) = 75.84, $p < .0001$, thus establishing the effectiveness of the favorability manipulation. More importantly, the interviewee was rated higher when he was presented as 75 years of age than when he was presented as 23 years of age, F (1, 36) = 11.56, $p < .003$. This tendency for the older target person to be rated more positively than the younger target person was significant in both the favorable transcript condition, t (36) = 2.20, $p < .05$,[2] and the unfavorable transcript condition, t (36) = 2.60, $p < .02$.

Discussion

Previous research has investigated reactions toward the elderly by having subjects respond to the general category of "old persons." In general, this prior research has shown that as a group the elderly are reacted to negatively (McTavish, 1971). In the present research, subjects received specific information about a particular elderly person before rating him. It was argued that such personalization of the target would evoke sympathy for him, and thereby produce a tendency to overcompensate

for the stereotype. This overcompensation was expected to manifest itself through more positive ratings of the older stimulus person.

The data were consistent with this reasoning: the 75 year old target was rated more favorably than the 23 year old target. Moreover, the older target was rated more positively regardless of whether the stimulus persons were portrayed in a favorable or unfavorable manner. Apparently, personalization of the target per se is sufficient to produce overcompensation.

Although the data are consistent with an explanation based on overcompensation other explanations might be offered. For example, a second obvious explanation is that subjects may have responded more favorably to the stigmatized target simply because it was the socially desirable thing to do. A third explanation derives from Kelley's (1971) augmentation principle of attribution. Briefly summarized, the principle holds that actors are given credit by observers for having to struggle to overcome some inhibiting influence in producing a behavior. Personalization may make the subject more aware of the limiting and inhibiting factors which confront elderly persons. If so, the increased salience of this general negative environment might then lead the subject to increment his rating of the aged accordingly. It should be noted that an explanation based on augmentation is not necessarily incompatible with an explanation based on sympathy. In fact, perception of the stigmatized target as struggling against a hostile environment may even provide the basis for a sympathetic reaction.

Regardless of which explanation applies, the present findings have important implications for past research on reactions to the elderly. This previous research has shown that when asked to respond to the general category of old person, subjects typically respond more negatively to

older persons than to younger persons (see e.g., McTavish, 1971). In contrast, the present research has shown that this negative prejudice can be turned into a positive prejudice if subjects are asked to respond to a particular old person about whom some personal information is know. This finding is consistent with those findings reported by Brubaker & Powers, (1976) who also argue that personalization of the elderly lead them to be rated more positively. In brief, the thrust of these remarks is that personalization is an important variable in understanding reactions to the elderly; and that earlier studies may have overestimated the amount of negativity directed against elderly persons by not providing subjects with a personalized target.

Reference Note

1. Carver, C. S., Glass, D. C., Snyder, M. L., & Katz, I. Favorable evaluations of stigmatized others. Unpublished manuscript, 1976. (Available from C. S. Carver, Department of Psychology, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida 33124.)

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Footnotes

[1]Copies of the interview transcripts, which were based on those used by Carver et al. (Note 1), are available from the senior author upon request.

[2]All tests of statistical significance reported in this paper are two-tailed.

Table 1

Mean Attractiveness Ratings

Young subjects rating personalized transcripts

	Target condition	
Transcript condition	Young	Old
Favorable	57.7	64.4
Unfavorable	38.4	46.3

Note. The higher the number the more favorable the evaluation.

N = 10 per group.